

S *tumbling Toward
a Genuine Conversation
on Homosexuality*

Some time ago and far up north, the conversation at a table of Mennonites turned to homosexuality. A farmer bluntly insisted the church must affirm its traditional stance or forever lose its way.

One woman said to me, "Isn't homosexuality an issue down your way?"

Someone else said, "Yes, at Germantown, isn't it?"

Suddenly it hit them. Years ago I was pastor at Germantown Mennonite Church, which was at the time of this anecdote in trouble with the larger church for its gay/lesbian-welcoming stance and has since been excommunicated.

"Uh, end of discussion," the woman said, "no offense."

"No," I said. "Let's work at this."

So we did. I described my thinking and stressed to the farmer that though we differed, I thought the issue was so complicated the body of Christ needed all our stances, and his could help mine grow.

I cannot explain exactly what happened. I can only say I genuinely believed the farmer had things to teach me. He reciprocated. Eventually, tears in his eyes, he said, "Maybe it really is true that we need each other. It scares me, but that means I need you." He drew my own tears.

—Reprinted from Michael A. King, *Fractured Dance: Gadamer and a Mennonite Conflict over Homosexuality* (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press U.S., 2001), 3.

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Edited by **Michael A. King**
Foreword by **Carolyn Schrock-Shenk**
Afterword by **Jeanine Czubaroff**
Last Word by **J. Ron Byler**

Living Issues Discussion Series
Volume 4



Publishing House
Telford, Pennsylvania

Cascadia Publishing House LLC orders, information, reprint permissions:

contact@cascadiapublishinghouse.com

1-215-723-9125

126 Klingerman Road, Telford PA 18969

www.CascadiaPublishingHouse.com

Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality

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Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2007030429

ISBN 13: 978-1-931038-47-8; **ISBN 10:** 1-931038-47-3

Printed in the United States of America

Book and cover design by Cascadia Publishing House



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Part One was first published in *DreamSeeker Magazine*, Winter 2006, also available online at www.CascadiaPublishingHouse.com/dsm/winter06/current.htm

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Stumbling toward a genuine conversation on homosexuality / edited by Michael A. King ; foreword by Carolyn Schrock-Shenk ; afterword by Jeanine Czubaroff.

p. cm. -- (Living issues discussion series ; v. 4)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-931038-47-8 (alk. paper)

1. Homosexuality--Religious aspects--Mennonites. 2. Church controversies--Mennonites. I. King, Michael A., 1954- II. Title. III. Series.

BX8128.H67S88 2007

241'.66--dc22

2007030429

14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

*To all who see each other's
viewpoints as treasures to be cherished or
are ready to learn more about how to work at such treasuring*

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Foreword

Of all my Amish aunts and uncles, “Levi” and “Sarah” were the most delightful (though at some point in my growing up, I learned that we were not related at all). We particularly enjoyed Aunt Sarah—she spoke her mind freely and had a deep-throated, hearty laugh. I remember occasionally commenting about her low voice and being amused, along with my siblings, by the few strands of long gray hair combed out over a brown wig—all under a prayer covering, of course. And we wondered why they never had any children.

It was sometime after Aunt Sarah died in a distant state that I heard more details about her. It became clear that she had chosen—or someone had done the choosing for her—to be female despite having (very small) male genitalia. I was shocked; the news raised many new questions for me. Levi and Sarah were completely accepted by the Amish (and non-Amish) community. Was Sarah actually male and this was the only way for “her” and Levi to have a (homosexual) relationship and marriage? If that was the case, their relationship would be condemned by (most) Mennonite and Amish standards. What if Sarah, raised as a girl in the Amish community, actually felt like a man and fell in love with “Hannah?” That relationship would have been considered a lesbian one and therefore also outside the standards of the community.

I have since come to know another intersexed person (see Lin Garber’s chapter, below) who had “genital reconstruction” and was raised as a girl. As a young adult, she fell in love with “Alice” and is now perceived, by herself and others, as a lesbian. What if her parents had made the “opposite” decision? S/he could have married Alice with the church’s blessing. Why is one condemned and the other not? What makes us male and female? What is gender anyway? How is it connected to sexual orientation?

These confused and confusing questions (indeed, I had a hard time even trying to articulate them as I was writing) cast the whole discussion of homosexuality and “same-sex” relationships in a new light for me. These situations, as well as learning about other similar ones, have not brought me clarity. They have, in fact, muddied the water even more for me. I cannot hear these kinds of stories and not begin to question the assumptions concerning gender and sexuality that I have grown up with. And that questioning of one’s assumptions, in my view, is a critical element of dialogue, or of “genuine conversation,” as Michael calls it.

The conversation that follows in this book is marked by courage and candor from many writers (as well as the editor!). These are not stories or convictions that are easily written. They are full of vulnerability and pathos and struggle. Sometimes I felt the need to turn the pages gently as a holy story unfolded. I was particularly moved by the chapters in which the authors seemed reluctant to be too declarative but rather, within their current convictions, were continuing the search for truth. It was as if they, too, sense their search to be a holy one.

Holding one’s truth somewhat lightly is another mark of dialogue. I have a friend who introduced me to the “grace of uncertainty” concept, and I have come to believe that this grace is critical to true dialogue. I often tell my conflict studies students that one of the first casualties of escalated conflict is uncertainty—meaning that as the tension rises, people tend to become more certain that their particular view of truth is *the* right one. Listening, I tell my students, is the next casualty; for what is the purpose of listening if I am already completely certain I am right? (I am talking about truly listening to understand, not just using the right technique to give the perception of listening.)

M. Scott Peck summarizes these principles wonderfully in a section from *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*. He describes telling his patients that it was wonderful when they were confused because it meant they were actually “poor in spirit.” He says,

It is uncomfortable, sometimes painful to be in such periods [of confusion]. Nonetheless it is blessed because when we are in them, despite our feeling poor in spirit, we are searching for new and better ways. We are open to the new, we are looking, we are growing. And so it is that Jesus said, “Blessed are the confused.” Virtually all of the evil in this world is committed by people who are absolutely certain they know what they’re doing. It is not

committed by people who think of themselves as confused. It is not committed by the poor in spirit.¹

Does this collection of essays actually represent meaningful dialogue/genuine conversation? I agree with Michael that you, the reader, will need to decide. Whether it does may depend on your definition of dialogue/conversation. There is not a completely consistent understanding among the various authors. Michael argues that a marker of genuine conversation is the ability to “see the value in the other’s view and to grow in my own understanding by incorporating as much of the other’s perspective as I can without losing the integrity of my own convictions,” something he wishes were more apparent. Sheldon Burkhalter declares that “true dialogue amid conflict is openness to change.” According to John Linscheid, the Mennonite denominational Council on Faith, Life, and Strategy defined dialogue as “reiteration of LGBT-despising positions” (a reiteration of the Mennonite Church’s teaching position). John D. Roth is clear that the “rhetoric of empathy” is needed for dialogue—and he also seems to believe that the time for dialogue on homosexuality is over.

What exactly makes dialogue genuine? Does one need to be open to changing one’s perspective or conviction about an issue? In my view, that readiness to change is the ideal but it is rarely realistic, especially in relation to issues as charged as homosexuality. I have come to believe that a minimum requirement for genuine dialogue is a readiness to change or modify one’s perspective about *the person or persons* holding the opposite point of view. (Perhaps this is moving from the *rhetoric* of empathy to the actual *experience* of empathy.) Is this element present throughout these essays? Only the authors know for certain, of course, but I sensed its presence in a variety of them.

While I believe passionately in the need for dialogue and have worked over the years to promote healthy exchanges between those holding divergent viewpoints, I have also become more understanding of the suspicion dialogue stirs. For some *dialogue* is a tired and overused word; that is perhaps why Michael chose to use “genuine conversation” instead.

But for others dialogue is actually an objectionable word and concept. I see at least two reasons for this. One is that it seems nearly impossible to truly listen to a story from the soul of another and not be moved by it. Our stories connect us to each other; they change us and the relationship. That makes dialogue risky and frightening. Having

said that, it is also true that sometimes “dialogue” is simply a code word for “change your mind”—and people use it toward that end. When that is the case, suspicion is an appropriate response. Some of us forget that it is possible to truly listen, understand, respect, and empathize without accepting as one’s own the views of the other.

I also have come to understand, at some level, the passion and anger—yes anger—experienced by LGBT folks who have long been struggling to find their place in the church, as well as in their families, their workplaces, and society in general. Their weariness, impatience, and disillusionment seems inevitable given what is at stake for them—and has been for a long time.

The essays in this book are sufficiently diverse to provide a broad perspective—though I would have welcomed hearing more from the “traditional” voice. I found myself often interacting actively with the authors—agreeing, disagreeing, being surprised, perplexed, and often, very often, deeply empathetic. I also found myself wondering about the next step: Where do we go from here? Are there gaps that need to be filled? A few things come to mind.

For one, I don’t see the issue of power being adequately addressed. Clearly Mennonites shy away from talking about power in general, but I don’t think it is possible to adequately address homosexuality in the church without addressing power dynamics more clearly than we have thus far. As I read John Linscheid’s chapter, I was reminded of several situations in which I served as a mediator/conflict consultant in relation to the role of women and was presented with a fundamental dilemma: What was I to do when a key part of my role was to ensure the participation of all relevant voices—but the women, who would be most affected by the outcome of the discussion, were not allowed to be part of the discussion?

Such is too often the case with homosexuality in the church today. How do we address such a clear power imbalance? Perhaps a small next step is a book of essays co-edited by a GLBT person and a straight person. Perhaps Michael and John Linscheid could take on such a challenge. I would also wish for face-to-face forums that could be safe and more balanced. That kind of forum would likely move us further from the “parallel monologue” tendency of the essay forum.

There are frequent references to other issues, such as divorce and remarriage and women and leadership, in which the Mennonite church

has departed from seemingly clear biblical directives. I wonder how our journey through those issues is similar to, and different from, our current journey. What specific things might be instructive for us today?

I agree with several of the writers that we need to give more attention to sexuality in general, heterosexual as well as homosexual. While it is hard to talk about the state of our unions, especially in church circles, we must do so. We need much more conversation about intimacy, sexual ethics, faithfulness in relationships, and a whole range of related issues.

In addition, I believe we as a denomination—a peace church denomination—have much more to learn about how to address our differences. (The jokes about being passive-aggressive are getting old.) I'll name three specific areas of needed learning:

(1) We need more training and lots more practice in reaching agreement around the contentious issues. That means more dialogue. It means finding and building on commonalities. It means really trying to understand how the interests of the other can be addressed in a resolution. It often means some compromise from what I think is the best path. Mennonites seem to mostly focus on our points of difference. We give up too quickly in our search for mutually satisfying resolutions.

(2) When issues involve differences that truly remain too great for any kind of resolution, we need to become more comfortable with agreeing to disagree, with continuing to mutually respect each other, and with ongoing worship and work within the same body. It is not possible, or even desirable, to have everyone in any church body think and believe alike. Our differences are many—some of them quite significant. That is appropriate. We can do better at accepting each other and living with our differences.

(3) Finally, I concede that there may be times when our differences are so great, our values or worldview or theological perspectives so divergent, that separation is appropriate. But I believe such circumstances are very, very rare. The more I understand the life and mandate of Jesus, the clearer I am that we should not cut ourselves off from each other or judge each other out of the kingdom, even when some kind of separation is necessary. So I am offering a “simple” proposal: *that we not allow ourselves to separate from each other until each group can bless the other and the other's ministry*. A commitment to this would in and of itself go a long way in transforming our conflicts around homosexuality—and, indeed, our relationships.

Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation is a compelling read, and I commend it to you. Michael has done the church an enormous service and I hope it is read by many people. A colleague of mine commented that perhaps it is coming a decade or more too late. Maybe he's right, but I'm not sure we were ready for it then. Hopefully we are now. And truly, we are a long way from being finished with the struggle around these issues.

—Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, Goshen, Indiana, is associate professor of peace, justice, and conflict studies, Goshen College.

Note

1. M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Traveled: The Unending Journey Towards Spiritual Growth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 80-81.

Editor's Preface and Acknowledgments

This book already includes some thirty-plus pages of editorial introductions spread over two parts. Let me keep this short. Except for the new responses at end, Part One was first published in a special edition of *DreamSeeker Magazine* (Winter 2006, available online at www.CascadiaPublishingHouse.com/dsm/winter06/current.htm). As noted in my introduction to Part One, Weldon Nisley's faithful dissent from his church's teachings on homosexuality formed the seed out of which this book grew. Agree or disagree with Nisly or the book, he deserves special thanks for setting the project—unwittingly at first!—in motion.

Next in line for appreciation are surely the writers of Part One, who established the foundation for the book, and the writers of Part Two, who respond to the Part One conversation as well as offer their own original materials. Parts One and Two, then, are closely interrelated as they come together to enable this book-length project, yet each has its distinctive origins and makes unique contributions.

As my introductions to Parts One and Two at times reveal but I want to underscore here, for many or all of these writers the mere decision to be included in this book was brave. Addressing homosexuality or “homosexuality” risks plunging one into dissension, ridicule, criticism, even employment jeopardy, no matter what one's perspective. So why not leave well enough alone? Special thanks to those writers who in choosing not to leave well enough alone made this book possible.

A note also on those pesky quote marks. The discerning reader will note that in routine use of the word *homosexuality*, including in the title, this book does not include quotes. That is a choice probably favoring one group over another. Often the preference of the LGBT com-

munity is for quotes. Why? Because, frequently following the work of the French theorist Michel Foucault, they see “homosexuality” as a construct, a Western cultural way of building understandings of sexual identity that may be considerably more arbitrary than we realize. And that view deserves engagement.

Why then not use the quotes? For a reason that will probably dis-satisfy all: Many will believe that the very effort to continue a conversation on homosexuality that should already be seen as concluded (the church already knows the right teaching here) biases this book in one direction. One modest way to reverse the bias is to drop those quotes.

And watching the biases is important, given that this book's overarching advocacy is not for a particular position on homosexuality but for a process of discernment that engages respectfully the variety of positions, including positions in some opposition to each other. There *is* a strong point of view—let the church do better than we have to trust that God speaks through all, not just a slice or a majority. But if that is the goal, then let as many of that “all,” holding as many different positions as possible, do the speaking. And let the book strive when possible not to so favor one position over another as to regress into speaking only for its slice.

I wish even more slices were represented. As I mention in the introduction to Part One, it has been a particular challenge to secure writing from persons who want to support the Mennonite Church USA teachings on homosexuality. Perhaps seventy percent of my efforts to acquire material not only for Part One but then again for Part Two went into seeking such writers. For reasons I speculate on in Part One but don't claim fully to understand, such writers are exceptionally wary of appearing in print. Although I see them as still underrepresented, more did appear to agree in Part Two than Part One. Given the reluctance of many of their peers to go public, I'm particularly grateful to them for enriching this book with their stories, biblical studies, and cultural analyses.

Now let the conversation stumble forward, missing quote marks and all, into many contentions, small and large, in hopes of getting somewhere.

—*Michael A. King, Telford, Pennsylvania, is editor, DreamSeeker Magazine; a pastor; and author or editor of five books, including Fractured Dance: Gadamer and a Mennonite Conflict over Homosexuality and Preaching About Life in a Threatening World (with Ron Sider).*

Part One
**Toward a Genuine
Conversation on
Homosexuality**

Introduction to Part One

Michael A. King

First a word of explanation to the many readers of *DreamSeeker Magazine* (and now readers of this Part One reprint of the Winter 2006 issue, which except for light copy editing to shift slightly toward book style preserves the original text, including less formal citation style) who are not Anabaptist-Mennonites: This is a particularly inhouse issue! I hope that won't be overly off-putting, but I want to recognize it upfront as part of stressing that the vision for *DSM* very much includes welcoming and serving readers from a broad range of communities and perspectives.

But now the topic is homosexuality, and Mennonites are barely managing to discuss this inflammatory issue within inhouse circles, much less take into account and appreciate viewpoints of those in the larger Christian community and beyond. For example, much of how homosexuality is being handled within Mennonite Church USA (the denomination to which most chapter writers belong) involves specifics of denominational statements, history, policies, and institutional structures.

This is why, rather than force artificial breadth of style on the writers, in editing this issue I tolerated more inhouse writing than normal. I hope those of you from other communities will be willing to wade through and possibly learn from how Mennonites are wrestling with this issue—provided it's clear we'll aim to move back to less inhouse processing in coming publications.

Now to how the Winter 2006 issue of *DSM* came to be. This special issue was not originally supposed to exist. The idea was to incorporate, within an otherwise standard collection of *DSM* articles on various

topics, two or three articles on homosexuality, one by Weldon Nisly and one or two by the denominational officials who suspended his ministerial credentials for performing a same-sex ceremony.

I had devoted my dissertation, which became *Fractured Dance: Gadamer and a Mennonite Conflict Over Homosexuality* (Pandora Press U.S., 2001), to study of and reporting on how Mennonites have been able—and perhaps more often unable—to understand each other across differences when discussing homosexuality. This has kept me ever interested in what we can learn from how we think and talk about this issue.

So what better case study, I thought, than to invite both Weldon and those who had disciplined him into sharing the blood, sweat, and tears of their stands, so that even if we disagreed with one or the other, we could begin to grasp the journeys of integrity that had led to such different decisions.

I was delighted to receive quick confirmation of interest from Weldon and eventually his article, now published here. I hope regardless of perspective, readers may be able at least to agree that Weldon has offered a passionate, thought-provoking, and stirring statement of his position and how and why he has come to hold it. Whether one sees Weldon's stand as one of willfull rebellion, faithful dissent, or a mix, I hope many of us may agree that Weldon's readiness to practice what he so eloquently preaches deserves serious engagement.

Meanwhile I was disappointed that all the key denominational decision-makers involved in the decision to suspend Weldon's credentials felt unable to proceed. Now what?

The vision was not simply to publish—and by doing so implicitly affirm—only Weldon's perspective. Rather, the hope was to catalyze a genuine conversation, from multiple points of view, within which authors modeled ability to respect and learn from each other even in disagreement.

My own history had shaped that vision and affected the shape this issue of *DSM* finally took. In the 1980s, as pastor at Germantown Mennonite Church (GMC), I found myself at a juncture similar to Weldon's. The congregation and I had reached consensus that GMC should consider accepting gay and lesbian members because the risk of clouding the gospel by too quickly rejecting categories of people as sinners was greater than the risk of offering too much grace.

However, it soon became clear that this stand could lead to catastrophic conflict with Franconia Conference (FC), one of the denominational bodies to which we were accountable. I was among the many at GMC who came to feel we must explore ways for GMC to offer grace while remaining accountable to and learning from the more traditional FC stand.

I remember taking a long walk during which I realized that I was at roughly the juncture Weldon more recently reached—but didn't have the clarity of call to move forward outside of accountability to Franconia.

I also remember one of the most painful conversations I've had with a congregant. When he learned of my decision, he told me that, like Moses, I was too flawed to lead the people all the way to the Promised Land.

It took me years—and I'm still mid-journey—to work through what my call was if not to step off the precipice and lead self or congregation into excommunication from the denomination (as did happen to GMC in 1997, eight years after I left). My human frailties ever cloud my ability to be sure I've heard the call correctly, so I keep listening to the voice of the Spirit and refining my understandings, but the clearest sense I've been able to get is that *my call is to support genuine conversations across differences*.

So I'm not Weldon, as I might have been. Nor am I a denominational official disciplining pastors like Weldon. Instead I'm an editor dreaming of ways we might do better, amid our bitter battles, at hearing each other—and as a result mutually growing in knowledge, wisdom, and understanding of truth.

This is why I couldn't simply publish Weldon's story and imply he had walked the right path, whereas any who disagreed were walking a wrong path. So when those who had disciplined him declined to tell their stories, I cast around for other ways to make Weldon's story part of a larger discussion that (1) held his type of perspective accountable to other perspectives yet (2) also invited those who disagree with Weldon to take seriously that there may be something to learn from a courageous pastor willing to pay such a price for his convictions.

The result is this special issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine*, devoted to a conversation on homosexuality. Is the conversation genuine? The reader will have to decide.

My own evaluation is that it could have been even more genuine. The writers tend to do what we all, including myself, do: take a stand and aim to make it persuasive. This is one key move in genuine conversation, as I understand it: to make as clear as I can why I hold this position and why you might find in it treasure to value in your own quest for truth.

But I'd wish for even more evidence of writers able to make the other core move I see as characterizing genuine conversation. This is to see the value in the other's view and to grow in my own understandings by incorporating as much of the other's perspective as I can without losing the integrity of my own convictions. Also many writers have been reluctant to engage Weldon directly, regardless of their perspective.

Still I at least spy welcome instances of ability to grow in understandings, as I'll address soon in commenting on what I see in each article. And I hope the very act of asking these multiple understandings to jostle against each other between the covers of this one issue of *DSM* at least points to what can happen if we start to talk across our differences and not just to people who think like we do.

Before turning to the articles themselves, I want to offer a challenge based on what I learned from trying to put this issue together: *Let's work harder in the Mennonite church to provide safe spaces for genuine conversations about homosexuality or other controversial issues.*

I say this because I was troubled to learn how wary people are of speaking on homosexuality. I began to sense that wariness in the responses of the officials who had disciplined Weldon. Their reasons for not writing I can respect and understand. I might well be equally unwilling to write my story if in their shoes. Still I was saddened to encounter their belief that it would do neither them nor their denomination any good to share the flesh-and-blood journeys that led to their decision.

Then I was saddened again by the reactions of many authors I contacted as potential contributors to this special issue. Again and again they declined to appear in print on grounds that it would be too damaging to them or others. These authors, noted leaders and scholars of both genders, were frequently themselves saddened by the inability to comment they were relaying, because it was at a conscious price to their own souls.

Such reactions seem to hint at how terribly the church cramps some of its leaders by implying or even stating that good leaders are those who

don't rock the boat, don't stir things up, emphasize peace and harmony—and leave the wrestlings on the really painful issues to others, maybe the retired pastors or theologians.

Now the stereotype might be that such leaders are radicals keeping under cover the lack of support for denominational teachings that might damage their careers. Maybe in some instances this is true.

Yet I experienced matters as more complex. The very act of wanting to discuss homosexuality tends to be viewed as radical—why do you want to talk about it if not to change things? Thus if genuine conversation was the goal, I had to make sure many conservative writers were represented. But I found I had to approach writers I saw as more traditional by about a three-to-one ratio to ensure their views were reasonably present. Despite the fact that they would be speaking with and not against the grain of current Mennonite teachings, they were reluctant to speak up.

Why? Partly, I believe, because in fact some may see little value in opening up a discussion they think should stay closed—since the church has already arrived at the right position. But also partly because they didn't want to be mired in the swamp of charges and counter-charges they feared they'd drown in if they put their views on record.

My challenge to those who want the discussion on homosexuality to stay closed, whether for reasons of theology or not getting in trouble, is three-fold:

First, will this in the end work? The issue is still alive among us. It's not going away. I won't be surprised if at some point it resurges with new intensity partly because the church has not found ways to routinize discussion of homosexuality instead of making it taboo. Making it taboo then gives it the energy of the forbidden. And that energy is not put to redemptive use but driven underground, where it may at some point lead to unpredictable and explosive effects.

Second, does refusal to converse, even if one believes the church has already found its final stand, fit the teachings of Scripture? "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence," teaches 1 Peter 15-16.

Third, does not engaging in conversation actually place the Mennonite church in violation of its own formal commitment to continue a dialogue on homosexuality?

And this takes me at last to comment on the articles in this issue of *DSM*, because Loren Johns, both in the reprint of his article included here and in a range of additional materials available on his website, helps highlight the full range of what formal Mennonite statements on homosexuality call for. The teaching position of the Mennonite Church USA (and Canada), as Loren rightly highlights, is that full expression of sexuality is reserved for heterosexual marriage. But that same teaching position also clearly calls for ongoing loving dialogue—or the type of genuine conversation I’m looking for.

I was startled when, as part of reviewing Loren’s article, I went back to the original wording of a key statement shaping the teaching position of MC USA. (The statement, adopted at Purdue, Indiana, in 1987 by one denominational stream, is similar to a 1996 Saskatoon, SK statement of another denominational stream. The streams have since merged to become MC USA and Mennonite Church Canada.) I was startled to see how clearly it calls for ongoing conversation amid awareness that more truth is yet to be discerned.

After teaching that sexual expression belongs in heterosexual marriage, the Purdue statement says this:

We covenant with each other to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ, recognizing that we are all sinners in need of God’s grace and that the Holy Spirit may lead us to further truth and repentance. We promise compassion and prayer for each other that distrustful, broken, and sinful relationships may experience God’s healing.

We covenant with each other to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other. As a part of the nurture of individuals and congregations we will promote congregational study of the complex issues of sexuality, through Bible study and the use of materials such as *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*.

DreamSeeker Magazine is one small outlet for conversation and discernment. As a private entrepreneurial venture, it has no formal standing in denominational structures. Still I hope this special issue exemplifies what it can look like to take seriously that “we covenant with each other to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other.”

Then we move on to an article that does perhaps have something closer to formal denominational standing, an editorial by Everett Thomas, editor of *The Mennonite*, the official denominational magazine of MC USA. Along with Loren's article, Everett's is included because it helps set the stage for the conversation that follows.

The key contribution I see Everett as making is this: He highlights the complexities involved in adopting and experiencing as a living document a confession of faith. He helps us grasp that the current *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* reflects "both eternal creed and carefully crafted consensus."

As I fallibly interpret this, Everett means that Mennonites need to respect the *Confession* as the best statement Mennonites currently have regarding how the will of God and the teachings of Christ and Scripture are implemented in the church. Thus no individual Mennonite or congregation dare flippantly disregard the *Confession's* teachings.

Still the document is a human one, reflecting the particular times and people shaping it; thus over time there will be continuing growth in understanding that will lead some day to fresh consensus and a new confession, as has happened often before in Mennonite history.

As relates to homosexuality, then, today's church consensus reflected in the *Confession*, along with such related statements as Purdue/Saskatoon, must be honored as articulating the teaching position of the church today. At the same time, there is space for provisional and informal conversation regarding how the passing of time and ongoing hearing of the Holy Spirit may shape the emerging consensus of future generations.

The hope is for the conversation here to unfold within those parameters, meaning (1) in respect for the current teaching position of the church and (2) in awareness that we must ponder generation by generation what the Spirit is teaching us today—otherwise we would all still be practicing our Christianity as if in a first-century (or earlier) time bubble.

That leads naturally into what C. Norman Kraus wants to do, which is to confront what we do when in fact we don't live and think precisely as biblical writers did yet want to be shaped by their understandings and teachings. As Norman puts it, "The problematic is not so much one of historical and philological investigation as of authentic contextual application to vastly different cultures today."

I take him to mean that, among challenges of taking the Bible seriously millennia after it was written, are these: (1) how we avoid being sidetracked by details of biblical cultural practices that may no longer be meaningful in our changed times so we can (2) emphasize receiving guidance from the core values of the biblical writers, whatever the details of any implementation.

Thus for example Norman wonders, What if the key issue isn't precisely which gender is doing the sexual behaving but rather whether the behavior fulfills the core scriptural expectations that such expression will be loving and faithful rather than promiscuous or exploitative?

But lest anyone be lulled into unthinking agreement with Norman's insights, John Roth raises concerns. These emerged because, to Norman's credit, Norman solicited them. Then I proposed publication of John's reply. I did so not to demolish Norman—who in turn has raised concerns about John's critique in a further response to John—but because publishing the two pieces together helps show what bringing different viewpoints into direct contact can look like.

As I review Norman versus John, I'm reminded that if core ingredients of genuine conversation include persuasively articulating one's own case along with learning from the other's case, any writing—including my own—will be open to critique. Who can know precisely what the right steps are when we enter that complex and delicate dance of aiming simultaneously to honor our own and another's perspective?

Turning to the specifics of John's critique, first John does make a commendable effort to note how, even if primarily in disagreement, he can learn from Norman. Then he moves to the worries. For one, is Norman wanting the other to hear him empathetically without doing unto others what he wants done to himself? Given my own emphasis on genuine conversation, I believe John rightly wants to make sure the call to listen is intended for oneself, not just the other.

Then John also wonders, When is enough enough? When can the church say it has spoken on an issue, and expect those who disagree to cease their dissent?

Here his thinking dovetails with views of Everett Thomas in his second reprinted editorial on "Rules Help Discernment." Everett in fact celebrates that the church is working well, because it kept its rules clearly in view when faced with Weldon's case and so was able efficiently and commendably to suspend his credentials.

I see both John's and Everett's points. As a pastor, I weary of second- and third-guessing after I've done the best I know to reach wise discernment on a congregational issue. Yet I fear they could also be read as suggesting that even such a conversation as this one unfolding in *DSM* is somehow disloyal to the denomination.

And I worry that they make no clear provision for faithful dissent. When I review church history, I see a perennial mix of fallibility and faithfulness. Repeatedly the church heads blindly and even willfully down what hindsight reveals to have been a wrong path. Then repeatedly it turns out that at least some dissenters were so dogged because they were rightly seeing that God was calling the church a different way.

Given such history, I hope we can balance wanting church teachings to command respect with recognizing that dissenters from such teachings may (1) be willfully rebellious but may also (2) be the prophets of the truth the rest of us can't yet see.

Next come Mary Schertz, Paul Lederach, and Ruth Weaver. I'll say little about them because I've already said it in so many other ways as part of exploring the nature of genuine conversation. I'll simply risk favoritism by noting that I see them as powerfully exemplifying the effects of engaging in such conversation. As they each report, their views continue to change and grow as they seek to take seriously even perspectives with which they once disagreed.

Then just as Paul Lederach's final words are ringing spine-tinglingly forth—"In Christ Jesus neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality counts for anything"—here comes Marlin Jeschke, who has devoted much of his equally long life to thinking through and publishing wise writings on a variety of matters often related to church discipline. The conclusion Marlin's life and thought have brought him to is that "heterosexual relationships constitute the norm."

I worry that Marlin reaches this conclusion without confronting as fully as Paul Lederach and other writers in this issue that whatever one considers the norm, reality has a way of being more complicated than the norm. We risk simply reaffirming norms rather than finding creative new tools for engaging those aspects of reality that don't fit norms. Confronting what doesn't fit the heterosexuality norm is how Paul Lederach reaches such a daring paraphrase of Galatians.

On the other hand, I flinch from the conclusion of some that we know enough about human sexuality to decide in a few short years that

a norm widely affirmed by most civilizations and religions throughout human history should just be jettisoned. I at least was unaware of homosexuality as a significant issue until I was already, in the 1970s, a young adult. Now I'm aging quickly but still middle-aged. Is that brief span, during which the core of public debate over homosexuality emerged, long enough for us to gain sufficient wisdom to overturn heterosexuality as norm?

That day may come, yet I suspect we need to test far longer than we have what it will do to marriages, families, children, and the entire human race if we simply jettison the norm. Marlin helps us remember why we need to take the time to discern wisely.

Finally Gerald J. Mast offers his "deconstructive" commentary on the entire range of writings and finds not only on the lines of what is said but between the lines of what is not said much to ponder, much to question, much to be grateful for as he helps us imagine our way toward "a coming body" that in Christ is neither male nor female.

My original editorial introduction concluded with the above summary of Mast. Still the conversation continued in the form of responses to the main articles in *DSM Winter 2006*. In the first brief set of responses, first published at the back of *DSM Winter 2006* and now reprinted nearly at the end of this introduction, several *DSM Winter 2006* authors responded to that issue. Nisly continued to plead for MC USA to respond pastorally rather than with disciplinary moves to the "problem of homosexuality." He reiterated that amid awareness of the political aspects of his actions, his motivation is primarily pastoral rather than political. Weaver wished there had been input from denominational leaders (a wish now partly fulfilled in this book through Sheldon Burkhalter's chapter). Amid engaging both those whose positions are closer to his own and those with whom he is in tension, Kraus continued to call for acknowledgment that more than one position on homosexuality can claim scriptural backing.

Then after *Winter DSM 2006* was published, more responses arrived. These are now published for the first time as the final section of Part One. These responses strike me as noteworthy continuations of the conversation for several reasons. First, if perhaps more sporadically than consistently, they show occasional evidence of interest in paying respectful attention to the positions with which they interact.

Second (and maybe more significantly), coming as they do entirely from outside the circle of those who wrote the original *DSM Winter 2006* articles, these new respondents engage the articles in fresh and passionate ways. They offer perspectives not adequately represented in *DSM Winter 2006*. That pleases me—even as I again conclude that at this stage of churchwise discernment, genuine conversation will tend not to mean a strong investment in learning from the other. Rather, the conversation will need to be implied by having varying positions jostling side-by-side with each other within the pages of the same magazine or book.

Forrest Moyer enlarges the scope of the conversation with his candid admission that he is “one who has experienced healing from a homosexual orientation.” This then makes understandable his perception that *DSM Winter 2006* focused too much on issues of polity and membership and did not adequately give voice to those such as himself who believe the church should give priority not to a “loving dialogue” that may short-circuit passion for healing but rather should emphasize precisely the possibility of healing from homosexual orientation. As one who agrees such voices were underrepresented in the original *DSM* articles despite my efforts to find and publish them, I appreciate that Moyer has helped fill that gap and in so doing, I believe, helped make the unfolding conversation more genuine.

Much the same affirmation can be offered in relation to Harold Miller’s response. Miller appreciates aspects of the *DSM* conversation, including my own reflection that the few decades since homosexuality emerged as an arguable issue may not be enough time to discern what position on homosexuality the Holy Spirit is inviting the church to take. Then Miller zeroes in on his primary contribution: What “authentically Christian” standards of sexual behavior are members of the gay and lesbian community prepared to uphold? Even if one were prepared to affirm same-sex sexual behavior provided it remained monogamous, would one find that this actually the behavioral standard being honored? If not, what then?

Finally, David A. Shank writes provides a quite detailed, substantive, noteworthy critique, nearly a chapter in its own right. Respectfully he explains why he sees my editorial oversight as biasing the conversation by calling one position “traditional.” Then he explains that this reflects parochial Western cultural forces which themselves bias our

thinking against a Messianic Word whose “wisdom on conjugality” continues to call us solely to affirmation of male and female partnering. As I privately responded to Shank, precisely the range of opinions on what the biblical or Messianic Word is concerning homosexuality indicates that his understanding of the Word is contestable. Nevertheless, he provides valuable perspectives both on the Word and its prophetic critique of Western culture.

Introduction to Part Two

Michael A. King

After Part One, originally *DreamSeeker Magazine* Winter 2006, was published, not only the responses now included in Part One but also additional comments arrived. Many were to me privately. Some were quite critical of given *DSM* articles. The criticisms often ran in opposite directions. Those in the LGBT community were understandably unhappy that a conversation about their lives did not include their voices. Those whose views might trend against LGBT perspective were unhappy that more voices reflecting their understandings were not included.

I was pleased to receive these unhappy responses. I don't mean I was happy that respondents were unhappy. Rather, their readiness to express concerns meant that what I had hoped would happen after publication of *DSM* Winter 2006 now probably could in fact happen: expansion of the conversation. As noted in my introduction to Part One, my earliest vision was simply to publish a few articles revolving around Weldon Nisly's story. But as it became clearer that a full issue of *DSM* would be dedicated to the conversation, I had to wrestle with how to simultaneously secure diverse content yet live within page constraints of a small magazine.

At that point I made the judgment call that including LGBT voices or the voices of persons who might consider themselves gay or lesbian but committed either to celibacy or healing of their orientation would not be viable on this first go-round. Why?

Not because I saw the heterosexual perspective as deserving exclusive attention. Nor because I think the church should remain the exclu-

sive property of heterosexuals; indeed my prayer is that, however the church in the future discerns what the Spirit is saying to us regarding sexuality, the time will come when gays and lesbians participate in such discernment from within rather than outside denominational structures. The same differences in perspective would need to be wrestled with—but what a thing of beauty I at least think it would be if such differences were not tied to membership considerations. I dream of a denominational polity in which first we are all part of the people of God, then from within equal membership within the same body we wrestle with each other's differing perspectives over how we should live out our sexualities.

But where to begin? As I understand the state of the Mennonite church, I'm not aware—though I may be missing some—of significant publishing venues beyond *DSM* and Cascadia Publishing House currently working at encouraging cross-fertilization of viewpoints across the spectrum of perspectives. Then for reasons I began to articulate in my editorial introduction to Part One, it has seemed to me that at least some Mennonite-connected publishing venue needs to encourage a more genuine discussion within the (largely) heterosexual community than has been unfolding in recent years.

Also a key part of my perspective is that the aspect of the discussion I hope to help encourage may have years to go. Thus part of my hope is to support step-by-step movement through various levels of discussion rather than expect it all to happen at once. As I explained to some of the critics, I invited no affirmative gay/lesbian voices into *DSM* Winter 2006 because I judged—fallibly—that this would pose two main challenges:

(1) Given the stated purpose of that special issue—to take a first step toward encouraging conversation across differences—if affirming gay/lesbian voices were included, some “we have converted to heterosexuality or are committed to celibacy” voices needed to be heard from. It would not be credible to encourage genuine conversation, then publish only the first set of gay/lesbian voices. I concluded that trying to include that layer of conversation as part of the first round of conversation and in the relatively few pages available within *DSM* would become impossibly complicated and conceivably counter-productive.

(2) I guessed that major segments of the hoped-for audience would simply stop attending to the discussion if it didn't take seriously the per-

pectives of those in the Mennonite church (at the moment apparently the significant majority) who believe the current teaching position should remain the final one. What I hope this book encourages is renewed discernment. But such encouragement can only have a modicum of credibility if it respects the current positions of those who would rather not reopen discernment even as it invites them to consider doing just that.

But *DSM* Winter 2006 was intended to be a first step, not the final step. This book is a second step. That is why I was pleased to receive responses from those unhappy with Part One. Because they could become the core of Part Two, as indeed they have. Does that mean now we're all a happy crew? No, as the chapters below at points reveal. Some of my above rationale for not including some voices in Part One has already been tested with voices in Part Two; they remain unconvinced it was justifiable not to include them in Part One. I respect that. And I sure am glad they're now in Part Two.

So how does Part Two stumble toward genuine conversation?

Stumbling

Let me first emphasize *stumbling*. I included the word in the title of this book (it was missing from the title of the *DSM* special issue) when one Part Two writer and critic of Part One privately labeled Part One “an important stumble” toward conversation. I thought that worth highlighting because, though I hope such publications can be important at least for some, I agree that any efforts I am involved with are stumbles. We're not going to get this right. I doubt we even know how to get it right. We can only stumble forward.

Yet even the choice of the word *stumble* was controversial. Another Part Two writer privately criticized it on grounds that many of the writers, including that critic, intend to step forward confidently. *Stumbling* remains in the title. Yet even that word shadows other truth, highlighting the difficulties of genuine conversation. We can only aim for the impossibility of stumbling confidently forward in hope that, as Nisly says, “nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

How then to begin the stumbling of Part Two? Suppose we imagine the stumbling as toward a vision my sister Noël R. King shared with me after she and I, at a point of intense conflict in our extended family,

found ways to honor each other's perspectives while each still needing space to stand by our own positions. In her e-mail Noël said,

Just a few minutes ago I had the thought that, regarding our different ways of approaching this, we are all like a jazz band here in life. When it is time for you to stand up and do your solo improvisation, as a fellow band member I listen in appreciation, interested to see where you take the notes this time. Then when it is my turn to improvise, I create my own riff while you listen in appreciation. After the song is over, it would be folly to shout, "You didn't play your notes the way I would have!" This is JAZZ we're talking about!

My primary tools, then, for hearing the music involved looking for the following: (1) ways writers convey persuasively, meaningfully, movingly their own passions to make them available as a treasure others can learn from; (2) ways writers show evidence of actually learning from—or at least being willing to consider learning from—treasures other than their own; and (3) pondering how out of this swirl of treasures might come if not a choir at least some of Noël's improvisational jazz, as writers play not only against but also with each other even while they highlight trumpet, piano, or clarinet in their solo moments.

Still, stumbling is all I've managed. What if I had chosen differently? What other choir, or jazz festival, or dance, or totally different group of metaphors might have highlighted treasures I've entirely missed? Or what if I had chosen, as some writers in this book might, to look for a different church—a church made up of persons of like treasure, those perhaps convinced exclusion of some must remain the norm? Or a church of those convinced the quest must be for inclusion of all except maybe for those who prefer to exclude some? Those on such quests will indeed see stumbles in this book's quest, which needs to be complemented and enlarged by theirs.

Scriptural and Gadamerian Sources of the Stumbling

Yet even as many other books and conversations emerging from other quests are needed, let me not imply seeing the quest that drives my editorial work on this book as totally arbitrary. Even as I believe

Scripture as well as the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition are rich enough to encompass many different quests, I do want this particular quest to emerge not just from personal idiosyncracies but also from Scripture.

Take my studies of Hans-Georg Gadamer, its results reported in my book *Fractured Dance*, briefly mentioned in Part One, and undergirding much of my editorial shaping of this book: I chose Gadamer not simply because he was a key twentieth-century student of how we engage in the process of understanding each other, of how we start with our own limited “horizons” of understanding but then grow in understanding as our horizons “fuse” with other horizons (to use several Gadamerian terms). I chose him because I was first a Christian and an Anabaptist-Mennonite, and treasures those heritages had given me made me see Gadamer as helping me further study how such treasures might be resources in our world of diverse, fractured, and often enmity-tinged viewpoints.

When I first encountered Gadamer, he seemed to be saying something familiar. I wasn’t sure what, but it pulled at me. Gradually I concluded that part of what was pulling me was this: The Anabaptist-Mennonite emphasis on love of enemies, grounded in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount teachings in Matthew 5:38-43 and elsewhere, often overlaps with Gadamer’s perspectives. What if, for instance, the process of understanding what seems alien, or different, or wrong to us were seen as one in which we are called to love enemies? What if even alternate viewpoints became “enemies” to love if not always agree with?

My interest in such a possibility only deepened as I studied the Franconia Conference delegate discussions that led to the excommunication of Germantown Mennonite Church and noted the rarity of calls to love “enemy” viewpoints. This historic conference, oldest in North America, excommunicated the oldest Mennonite congregation in North America. Yet for generations the conference has ended its assemblies with a reaffirmation of “our desire to continue in and witness to the nonresistant and simple faith of Christ. . . .” *Nonresistance*. The classic Mennonite word for getting at what others, and today often Mennonites, have called nonviolence or pacifism. Nonresistance: rooted in Christ’s teachings not to return evil for evil but to love the enemy.

Yet once the enemy was within and among us, we didn’t know how to apply our own classic commitment to follow Jesus. What if that same

nonresistant, nonviolent, pacifist stream of values were brought to bear in our discernment settings? That was what I wondered.

And such wonderings took me, in company of Gadamer, to other parts of Scripture to see them afresh. What if we saw the Acts 2 miracle of Spirit-inspired ability to understand foreign tongues as applying even to the foreign tongues of our varied stands? What if we saw the Apostle Paul's hymn of love in 1 Corinthians 13 as applying to discernment amid conflicting viewpoints? What if we saw Paul's reminder that here we see only as if through a mirror, darkly, as a commentary on the limitedness of any of our understandings, including our interpretations of Scripture and our efforts faithfully to capture God's ways in confessions of faith?

What if we saw the treasures of our particular perspectives as analogues of the spiritual gifts Paul identifies in Corinthians 12? And what if we then concluded, as Paul does in relation to spiritual gifts, that as the body of Christ can't live without the nose or foot of this or that spiritual gift, neither can it live without the leg or eye of this or that understanding?

What if we saw Galatians 3:28 as saying that in Christ Jesus there is not only no male nor female, slave nor free, but also no ideological divisions of the sort so afflicting us today? What if we considered the possibility that in Christ there is no liberal or conservative, no radical or traditional, no open-minded or closed-minded, provided all are united in common affirmation of Jesus as Lord?

In Part One, Paul Lederach provocatively invites us to consider this paraphrase of Galatians 5:6: "In Christ Jesus neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love." What if we also paraphrased, "In Christ Jesus no theological or philosophical understanding counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6)?

What if we saw 1 John 4 as calling us to love each other across theological battle lines? "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (vv. 7-8). What if we saw 1 John as speaking even to the fears that prevent our discussing constructively, rationally, productively, such an inflammatory issue as homosexuality? "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts

out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love” (vv. 18-19). What if, I wondered, God through 1 John and Gadamer was telling us to apply even to our battles over theology, worldviews, Scripture and its interpretations, these words? “The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and their sisters also” (v. 21).

These are the types of Scriptures that drew me to Gadamer. These are the types of applications Gadamer then helped me make. As part of my treasure, not everyone’s treasure—in Christ Jesus no Gadamerian stumblings count for anything; “the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” So in faith, in love, but in awareness of how finite are my own understandings, herewith more of this book and its quest for how from our initial discords we might produce jazz.

Stumbling Toward the Jazz We Might Someday Play

In arranging the chapters of Part Two, I started for several reasons with the treasures of Michael A. Schaadt and whatever musical instrument he uses to play his story. First, as a gay man he is one of those voices not heard in Part One. Second, he is an active pastor in Franconia Conference, that regional MC USA body based in southeastern Pennsylvania. It thus took exceptional courage for him to go on record. So far Schaadt’s journey, one of great integrity as I see it, has led him to feel able to honor the teachings of MC USA as a pastor. The boundaries of his life remain within the boundaries required of an MC USA pastor during this era in which teachings on homosexuality generate in/out decisions. If he ever stretches those boundaries, he will not do so casually but only as one who has tried all the paths the church has asked him to try and has concluded that still God calls him on.

If that point came, as it has in its own way for Nisly, the church would engage him in some version of the discernment Sheldon Burkhalter delineates in his chapter. Then I pray that set in motion would be both the types of guidelines Burkhalter spells out and an openness to wrestle with how the Holy Spirit uses faithful dissent to keep the church growing in understanding God’s ways.

The final reason I placed Schaadt’s story first is simply because his story most surprised me. I approached him as a Part Two writer with the

understanding that his narrative, though unique, would resemble those of Forrest Moyer and Marcia Pusey. I thought it would contribute to genuine conversation to hear from a pastor who has simultaneously been ready to be honest about his sexual preferences yet commit himself to be healed of them by turning away from them. Though it is far richer than I anticipated, this openhearted narrative of a life shaped by faithful walking with Jesus, the story I got was not what I expected.

This seems in itself meaningful: We do this to people. We expect one story. This one will play the trumpet. Like this. That one will play the piano. Like that. But people are so much grander than the limited musical talents or styles we often expect them to display. I pray for a church that, as Thiessen Nation rightly pleads for below, calls us to changed living and not merely tolerance. But I pray also for a church that leaves ongoing space for discernment, for people to be the wild ragged selves we really are.

I moved next to Forrest Moyer in an effort early in Part Two to give the type of viewpoint expressed by David Shank in his Part One response a hearing. And I moved to Moyer because he helps us plunge deeper into the challenges of playing jazz and not cacaphony with each other. First Schaadt. Now another of those not-heard-from voices continues the conversation. Yet Moyer does not want the church to accept him as a gay man nor to give him space to discern who God is calling him to become. He wants the church to help him not to be a gay man. He wants the church not to make harder for him, through such acceptance, his own commitment to hear what Shank calls the Messianic Word.

Moyer describes himself as one who has had a “homosexual orientation” but through the power of Christ is experiencing the birth of a heterosexual identity. He wants to be supported in that journey of healing, not discouraged from it. Thus “my first and most pressing concern is that the church seems too ready to follow the world in seeing homosexual desire/attraction/orientation as permanent and unchangeable.”

I certainly see Schaadt as courageous. Interestingly, then, Moyer’s stand, along with that of Marcia Pusey, whose concerns though not identical overlap with his, strike me as also among the more courageous voices in this book. As earlier mentioned, it was exceptionally difficult to secure such stories. One lesson I learned is that it can be particularly frightening for such writers to go on record—because then they risk

being ostracized by both the heterosexual and the LGBT communities. Those who have found the courage to appear nevertheless in these pages deserve special recognition and respect.

Moyer also manages to vulnerably and candidly tell his story while seeking to remain respectful of those he knows will disagree with him. He doesn't flinch from his plea that the church maintain its boundaries but does wish he could get to know some in the LGBT community. And, echoing Harold Miller in Miller's response to Part One as well as as in his Part Two chapter (immediately following), Moyer appears ready at least to consider what it might mean for his understandings if he could meet those in the LGBT community truly "living happily in homosexual relationships."

The challenge of making jazz with Moyer is that he appears to conclude that if, say, we allow John Linscheid, Lin Garber, Luke Miller, Sarah Macdonald (below), and others to make music in the same church, then he won't be able to make his music. I think I see why he feels that way; if truly Christ is calling him to the choices he has articulated, and the church opens the gates to those who hear the music of their sexuality differently, will he have enough support faithfully to make the music God has called *him* to? Or will discordant oompah's blare louder and louder until they override his music?

Some of course will want to argue that "healing" is not possible or to be encouraged and that true healing for Moyer would be to embrace a gay identity. That may be the right response to some persons. Let us debate how homosexuality is generated and what it means to find healing when it arises within and among us (even as we also wrestle with how within our heterosexualities we need healing). But might those musicians tempted to say this to Moyer and any of his co-musicians be invited to show more respect than to impose on him their understanding of healing? Unless Moyer can be assured his notes will be treasured, how dare he risk seeing his music as part of a grander music rather than as the *only* music?

In his chapter, Willard Swartley asks a related question:

Can a given congregation that wishes to be "open" to receive as members those in "covenant union" and bless those unions also support those who journey from same-sex practice to celibacy or heterosexual marriage? Can these two groups live, worship, and celebrate together Jesus Christ's redeeming power?

Any church that invites all to add their notes to the improvisation must do the hard work of envisioning how to honor the treasure not only of those who simply plead for inclusion but also those who fear that the inclusion of some will in some way exclude care for their own treasure—including the treasure of heterosexuality. This is likely impossible. This is why, as Nisly keeps reminding us, God the master musician will need to help us invent a grander music than we now know how to play.

Harold N. Miller comes next because, again, the viewpoint he expresses was underrepresented in the Part One conversation and also because his more theological approach helps complement Moyer's testimony. Miller is clear: The current position of MC USA should remain the ultimate position. Scripture, he believes, teaches this. Miller makes a thoughtful case for his beliefs.

Miller also, I believe, stretches himself commendably beyond his own initial inclinations—and toward that genuine conversation move of not only advocating a position but also learning from other positions—in seeking to glimpse, as even his chapter title hints at, what might cause him to “overturn biblical teachings” on homosexuality. This as a vital exercise. Too few of those of us holding any position are willing to ponder what it might take for us to open ourselves to a viewpoint other than the one we start with.

In the end Miller is not ready to change his initial core position. Critics will find weaknesses in his reasons, as they will in any of this book's arguments. Still Miller is ready to let his critics glimpse what answers and lifestyles might lead him to modify his initial stand.

John Linscheid follows Miller, to highlight again how challenging is this work of genuine conversation and discernment. Agree or disagree with him, surely Linscheid cedes ground to none in his passionate faith and commitment to ground his understandings in Scripture and great love for the church. Yet Linscheid's stand is dramatically different from those of Moyer or Miller.

With a prophetic blaring of trumpets and clashing of cymbals, Linscheid calls the church to account for unethical processes jury-rigged to ensure that discernment procedures simply continue to replicate the MC USA position on homosexuality. He takes me to task for treating LGBT's as an afterthought. He excoriates pleas for dialogue (including my own), on grounds that the power dynamics favoring his exclusion will not be accounted for.

As Linscheid makes clear, he and I don't see eye to eye on some of these points. Indeed I would have wished for Linscheid to be able to say to someone like Moyer or Miller that he can learn from their stories and understandings even if in disagreement. I would wish he could say to Moyer that he sees the treasure of Moyer's life and perspectives and hopes for a church that will likewise treasure it, even if Linscheid's is a different treasure. I find it hard to imagine how those who on grounds of sincere fidelity to Scripture disagree with Linscheid would experience enough respect in his position to enable them in turn to risk making space for his perspectives. We humans are made so that we need to know that if we honor the other, we will be honored in turn.

Still I see Linscheid as contributing to genuine conversation through the sheer eloquence and clarity of his jeremiad (meant in the best sense of the word, as an echo of the prophet Jeremiah). Agree or disagree with him, his treasure deserves its own cherishing—and I at least want a church that listens to him along with those who might diametrically oppose him. I want a church that includes Linscheid in the jazz band—if in fact Linscheid at this point sees value in that. I say that not dismissively but in respect for conviction that amid what he sees as the betrayals of God's Spirit by the church, "God has come into exile. God's Spirit moves among the outcasts."

At one point I thought the next chapter should trend differently than Linscheid's, but then it seemed to me that we need to linger with his concerns a while longer. Linscheid does make a point worth pondering: The majority of MC USA members favor a hetero-centrist teaching position Linscheid—a member of excommunicated Germantown Mennonite Church—knows excludes him. He is also correct that Part One excluded voices such as his own. If I were in Linscheid's shoes, I'd be angry too. In Part One, Shank makes a case for the cultural dynamics that bias discernment toward Linscheid's position. Whatever the merits of Shank's contentions (and they too offer treasure), efforts at genuine conversation need to engage Linscheid's understandable conviction that within MC USA the bias is toward the "John, you may not be part of us" position.

To help promote that engagement, Lin Garber comes next. Garber's concerns as both a gay man and committed Mennonite aren't identical to Linscheid's, but there is considerable overlap. And Garber helps provide evidence that the 1995 *Confession of Faith in Mennonite*

Perspective and other statements on homosexuality have evolved into a sort of “canon law.” Year by year, as Garber sees it, the space for true discernment still open to more music from the Spirit has shrunk, as confessions and documents have been interpreted and reinterpreted to limit the range of potential interpretations.

This includes a subtle shrinking of the denominational call to repent of rejecting those of different orientation. As Garber points out, the first version of the following statement was adopted by the General Conference Mennonite Church in 1986: “We confess our fear and repent of our rejection of those of us with a different sexual orientation and of our lack of compassion for their struggle to find a place in society and in the church.” In 1987, the Mennonite Church (later to join the General Conference to become MC USA) adopted the same statement. Except that, as Garber mourns, “Especially pointed, to me, is the omission of two little words by the MCs gathered at Purdue: they left out ‘of us’ after ‘those.’ Already the process of ‘othering’ was well under way. I submit that it is time for a renewal of those vows.”

If I have a worry about Garber, it is that he seems almost to pretend to hear a different music than is actually intended. The efforts to make Article 19 leave space for same-sex marriage seem forced. Garber observes that “What I was blindsided by . . . was the way the received understanding of the phrase ‘God intends marriage to be a covenant between a man and a woman for life’ would quickly shift away from the ‘for life’ part of it to the ‘man and a woman’ part.” I’m not aware of any realistic reading of Mennonite discernment leading to Article 19 that would have envisioned it as also intending to make space, through its silence or textual or subtextual nuances, for same-sex marriage.

Garber can make a case for same-sex marriage. This book includes several chapters making such a case one way or another. However, I’d wish for Garber not to try so hard to hear a music in Article 19 possibly not entirely there. I’d wish for him to help us imagine how we might play the primal melodies of Article 19 yet improvisationally enough for Garber to add his notes. That way we might together enact the renewal of vows to include “of us” Garber calls us to.

Encouragingly enough, Garber does begin the work of adding his notes to the church’s in affirming the validity for same-sex marriage of Article 19’s “for life” aspects. This affirmation helps respond to concerns raised by Miller, Moyer, Swartley, and others regarding what ethi-

cal commitments members of the LGBT community are prepared to make.

Then if there is to be conversation, let the conversation continue—by juxtaposing with Garber yet another thoughtful chapter but one trending away from Garber’s views. In addition to the treasures to be found in his call, echoing Eugene Peterson, for “fear-of-the-Lord” living, Mark Thiessen Nation is ready to be held accountable by these in the LGBT community with whom he disagrees. He aims to wrestle with the scourge of homophobia. And he works hard to maintain focus on broad scriptural principles, such as the meaning of loving both God and neighbor, in relation to which we might make common cause.

My main concern is that strengths and limits of his chapter may intertwine: In emphasizing broad biblical principles with potential to generate some consensus among persons holding different positions on homosexuality, he may risk staying so general he doesn’t fully enable us to hear what his instrument might add to the ensemble once he plunges into the messy tangles of the music itself. What might he say, for instance, to the writers in this book prepared, as some appear to be, to wholeheartedly affirm his call toward “a substantive and holistic ethic for living faithfully” even as they conclude there can be a holistic and faithful same-sex ethic?

The same above-the-messiness concern might be raised in relation to Bruce Hiebert. Hiebert’s thought trends against Thiessen Nation’s. Yet he joins Thiessen Nation in an intentional effort to stay far enough above the fray to minimize unproductive battling. Again the risk is that the principles may prove evanescent once applied to real-life discernment amid the tensions.

But this is not to dismiss Hiebert (or Thiessen Nation). Deserving consideration is Hiebert’s core insight that “We Christians have voted to endorse a most unsafe existence: the worship of a radical God of grace.” We have voted to worship *God*, and God’s ways are not our ways. Then if we only lock ourselves into pre-discerned denominational statements, how do we accommodate this God if God’s ways turn wild and burst out of our prior discernments? Might we not want to worship God over our prior discernments—whatever their theological bias might be?

This is the key question Hiebert helps us ask. And it is a wonderful question to ask in the midst of this book, throbbing with the pain and

power of such varying understandings of what God wants of us. The challenge for me as much as anyone, and here is where Hiebert doesn't quite get down into the mess, is the human tendency to expect God's wildness to burst the constraints of how others—and not we ourselves—see and hear God acting.

Next more reminders that we deal here not only in viewpoints but in flesh-and-blood people. Let me start with an outer circle, then zoom in. There are the many of us (including me) among whose loved ones are members of the LGBT community or those who, like Moyer, seek healing from their orientation. Any conversation that does not include the experience of family members has stumbled indeed.

Alicia Yoder dares to acknowledge the fear so many parents experience in today's homophobic culture and church: If your child turns out to be gay, what a nightmare. Yoder shows how true it is that in a denominational decision to not engage in discernment able to bring us to a more redemptive place than we have reached, we are shutting the door harder on the closet, not healing the fear and pain of those behind the door or of the parents who worry over them.

Joyce Lind dares to name the human condition: a mix of feelings. So many of us have seen so many shifts in understandings of sexuality in just a few decades. We're confused. We're unsure. We want to honor teachings of the Bible and church. We want to love our cousins, our brothers, our sisters. But what does it mean to do that? Can we really be certain that if we just accept, now we have found the biblical way? Can we be sure that if we simply reaffirm that only heterosexual expression is godly, now we have found the way? Through the story of her walk with cousin Kirsten, Lind helps us ask such things and in a form particularly suited to improvisational music.

What determination to convey the flesh-and-blood immediacies of the experience of being gay or lesbian Luke Miller and Sarah MacDonald offer! I'll keep my comments sparing here because the gifts of these stories are hard to abstract from the words in which they are told. Take Miller, who sings, lyrically, the words swooping up beyond and down beneath the melodies of the church in his head, of the shivering energies of his experience:

You see, those ten thousand folks are always there, telling me where I'm safe, telling me who I am, where I'm from—deciding

when it's okay for me to open my heart. Where those inner angels sing safety, home, light, warmth, that's where the boys I met really struck me right to the heart, right through the bone, took my breath away. Those folks sing life and love, and I'm scared but they keep singing so I follow. I start to come alive, I start to love—gay love, same-sex love, boyboy manman love. Their song said love so I loved—but then their song said you are a gay nothing, and you are not safe and you are not home and you are not warmth and you are not life, and we don't want to be in here.

Take MacDonald, making it impossible (for me at least) to dismiss her integrity, her particular contribution to the music, simply because it has come into tension with the church's teachings:

Coming to know myself as lesbian has taught me so much about God's tender grace. Each time I share my story with friends, and they—whatever their theological perspectives—affirm me as an individual, I rediscover once more that I am indeed a beloved child of God. Coming out has taught me about vulnerability and courage, risk and security. It has taught me to hold gently the scared and shattered pieces of my spirit and has made me long to embrace the broken hearts and awkward edges I see in neighbors all around.

We deal not in viewpoints but in flesh and blood. Flesh bleeds.

Then Ted Grimsrud, Nancy Kerr, and Willard Swartley remind us again of why the blood in the first place. It's not that we want to wound people. It's that we feel ultimate matters are at stake. But we reach different conclusions. So we all make our cases. And whatever we do or don't say blesses some and hurts others.

So Grimsrud reminds us once more how it can be that those who don't hold the majority MC USA position think and act not due simply to the crumbling moral structures of Western culture and church but an outgrowth of efforts faithfully to understand the Bible. Grimsrud carefully traces the chain of reasoning that leads him to conclude that

We simply don't have any direct teaching in the New Testament aimed specifically at Christians that would clearly override the biblical bias on behalf of vulnerable people. Jesus' message of welcome to so-called "sinners" provides our norm. That is, there re-

ally seems to be no basis in the Bible to forbid same-sex relationships simply based on the fact that they are same-sex. There is basis in the Bible to welcome as full members into the fellowship people who are inappropriately labeled “sinners” by religious institutions.

Nancy Kerr extends and complements Grimsrud with her conviction that what must unite the church is not inclusion or exclusion of any group of people but rather covenanting to “question each other in the church in love.” In Kerr’s church there is high ethical and scriptural purpose combined with recognition (echoing Kraus in Part One) that our understanding of the ways of God is dynamic, varying from era to era, culture to culture, person to person. We further God’s ways by humbly recognizing the limits of our ability to understand God or to redemptively enforce the boundaries of purity.

I wonder—as many likely do of my own advocacy for a multitude of instruments contributing their notes—how Kerr then includes the music of those who hear too little clear melody line in music like hers. Or how Grimsrud (or I myself) harmonize with those who believe Grimsrud’s approach honors some scriptural trajectories at the expense of others. But certainly here there is ample room for improvisation.

Grimsrud and Kerr’s passions are to extend the ministry of Christ to those vulnerable in any culture. Then along comes Willard Swartley, with a comparable passion—only it looks for Christ in different places. Swartley joins those who see MC USA teachings as helping Mennonites remain faithful against the discordant, Christ-shredding notes of liberalizing church and culture. What Swartley wants to know is where the stories of persons released from LGBT identities are. Rightly he seeks flesh-and-blood instantiation of the position he affirms: If in fact the redemptive way is the MC USA way, there should be stories illustrating such redemption, yet there are few.

One question I wish Swartley had asked is whether here flesh-and-blood is trumping doctrine. Swartley and others say this is how it should work. But does it? Why so easy (as it was) to find for this book stories of those claiming their LGBT identity, despite the great social costs, yet so hard (as it was) to secure stories such as Moyer’s or Pusey’s? Could it be that some are called to celibacy and reorientation but many are not?

Swartley's speculation is this:

Since Mennonites talking most about GLBT agenda seek to normalize gays and lesbians into family and church life, does concern arise not to jeopardize this process by hearing the stories also of those people who by experiencing new Christ/God relationships and perspectives (a form of "conversion"), counseling, and/or support groups have moved from same-sex practices to celibacy or heterosexual living?

This possibility also deserves serious consideration. I am grateful to Swartley for raising it as well as for pointing toward possible sources for such stories as he and I both would like to see included in any genuine conversation.

Phil Kniss and Marcia Pusey are near the end for a variety of intertwining reasons. First, though I learned of Pusey's story from another writer in Part Two, Kniss is her pastor. So their stories in that sense intertwine in this book and no doubt also in their congregational life together.

Another reason to place Kniss toward the end is that, after all the theologies and hopes and stories that precede it, all the wishes for healing by leaving a sexual identity or claiming it, Kniss brings us back down into congregational practices. For many of us, the congregation will be the setting in which these matters are hammered out. Kniss helps us do the hammering.

And he helps us bridge some of the tensions evident in the book. Here we can hear, if faintly, what the jazz might sound like if played in the real world. Kniss is himself committed to the current teachings of MC USA. That puts him at one place on the spectrum. That gives him one type of jazz instrument to play. He is at the same time convinced that our current handlings of membership are not doing much good. We apply membership formalities to exclude and include rather than to mutually lift each other toward God's call for our lives. We need a different understanding of membership—one that allows all of us, straight or LGBT, rich or poor, greedy or stingy, alcoholic or dry in both spirit and Spirit, to join in one body to become whole.

Here Kniss makes space—and a carefully thought-through intentional space rather than a careless space emerging only from palid tolerance—for all to play in the ensemble. What they make will still be

music, not discord. There will be adequate clarity regarding the nature of the music and the need for disciplined practice to undergird the improvisation, to maintain the beats and harmonies of jazz and not merely a scattering of random notes. With Thiessen Nation and others, Kniss wants a robust ethic of the Christian life. But there will also be enough space for the jazz to be unpredictable, for the honky-tonk piano to follow the muted trumpet as it does in “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” when the Preservation Hall Jazz Band plays it.

Actually of course, things are still not so simple. Some writers of this book may feel this church gives too much latitude. Others may feel this church imposes a stridently heterosexual screech over the underlying music. This is why this church remains, no doubt, as much dream as reality except in occasional exceptional settings. Still, this is a type of church I hope conversations such as this book encourages will take us toward.

A key reason for placing Marcia Pusey’s story second-last is that it seems to me to embody that the tensions are not only between us but also within us. We are contradictory, complex, often shape-shifting creatures, we humans. Sometimes truly to let God’s image in us bless the world is to claim life within the contradictions. So Pusey empathizes with the lesbian journey and shares certain concerns and commonalities with it. Yet she has not wanted to embrace this identity for herself. She sees how dangerous the homophobic and exclusion-prone church can be, yet she also wants the church, to some extent yet in a different key echoing Moyer, to support her in her move away from homosexuality.

But no, that’s still not quite right. For Pusey it’s even more complicated. She wants the church to call her not so much to a particular sexual identity as to place her identity in God’s hands. Let the love of God provide her fundamental orientation, not a particular sexual identity:

I don’t know that I have ever succeeded in explicitly defining my sexuality, and at this point in my life I don’t want to. While I don’t want to disregard my sexuality, I don’t want to assign too much significance to it either. I know this way of thinking about sexuality does not conform to a value held by many in our society of the the high importance of sexual fulfillment and expression. However, I am still able to bring my sexuality—with its longings and awarenesses—in front of the Father and ask, “What does this all mean? And what does it mean regarding who I am?” I can feel his

arms of love enfold me and hear him say, “It doesn’t really matter . . . I love you.”

Pusey struggled for months with what to say and whether to say it. Another chapter born out of great courage. Another writer who deserves to be honored and respected for having the integrity to bless us with a narrative that fits no preconstructed categories. I’m reminded here of Hiebert: Pusey serves *God*, not a tame God but the God who takes her wherever God takes her, whether or not it fits a standard path.

The chapter by Sheldon Burkhalter, already briefly mentioned in comments on Schaadt, seems an appropriate one to bring this project in stumbling toward a genuine conversation full circle. It all started with Weldon Nisly and the hope of generating comment from leaders in Nisly’s Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference. Now here is a chapter by a PNMC leader. Burkhalter does not intend it simply as a commentary on Nisly. Yet it provides glimpses of the wrestlings leaders working at discernment in such cases must engage in. Thoughtfully and constructively, Burkhalter ponders the realities that there will be tensions between individual conscience and church teachings. Then what?

Overall, I find myself, as I imagine traveling with Burkhalter’s guidelines through the various contentious issues I have faced as pastor, in harmony with Burkhalter’s proposals. Each of his “Core Principles and Guidelines for Addressing Differences” strikes me as essential. The moment in imagination I kick one out as too restrictive of my freedom of conscience, I think of how I’d feel if another pastor violated the guidelines to push positions that seemed to me to disrespect key scriptural or Anabaptist-Mennonite teachings. I’d hope to see the guidelines used to generate some accountability! Although in Part One I noted points of tension with the perspectives of Everett Thomas, as I understand him he too is seeking the types of discernment Burkhalter calls for. There is treasure in such quests.

The rub: I worry that a weakness of Burkhalter’s significant contribution to the conversation is to not quite fully maintain creative tension but to resolve the tension in favor of the community, as seems true also of Thomas. Burkhalter does in his case studies illustrate how the individual pastor may work dynamically in community to help the community’s understandings grow. And particularly the earlier items in his list of guidelines do provide a role for the individual conscience. The re-

mainder of the guidelines, however, seem written from the perspective of a community seeking to hold leaders accountable rather than also from the perspective of leaders seeking simultaneously to be accountable to their community *and* to the promptings of a Holy Spirit who may primarily—but not always—speak through the community.

Burkhalter himself seems to indicate his concern to maintain the primacy of the community, commenting that the guidelines

seek to reflect the teaching of Paul in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 about restraint of one's individual liberty out of respect for another's conscience. . . . In a culture so steeped in individualism as is American society, the church is prone to independent congregationalism and autonomy, but it is necessary to be intentional about the essential place of Christian community in the body of Christ and its missional calling.

I see him as mostly right to so emphasize the community. Thus is the concert hall maintained. Still I worry. What I said in Part One in commenting on Everett Thomas I echo here: I would wish for bolder engagement with the reality that historically some of the greatest breakthroughs of the Spirit into the life of the church have come from the faithful dissenters (including those hotheaded early Anabaptist reformers) who come hell or high water have chosen God over a particular version of church. What if all Burkhalter's guidelines are faithfully followed—as typically I believe they should be—and still they're not flexible enough to accommodate Hiebert's God wilder even than any of our guidelines, a God able to surprise us, including me, just when we think we have her and him guided in?

What if those voices particularly comfortable with community-centered guidelines for discernment help keep the church concert hall strong, its instruments tuned, its melody line unmistakable? Then what if the faithful dissenters help keep the music alive, dynamic, unpredictable even as God is unpredictable? What if Nisly, though open to criticism such as this book includes, helps the Holy Spirit speak truths the church would otherwise have missed? What if Schaadt's music, past, present, and in its unpredictable future forms, invites us to ask yet again whether when fruits of the Spirit come from those we might be tempted to exclude, what needs changing is not musician but our ability to hear a higher music?

Yet one needn't be sure Burkhalter has the balance precisely right to appreciate a pathbreaking effort to speak from the trenches of community leadership amid individual-community tensions. Here a denominational leader goes insightfully on record regarding what is involved in navigating treacherous matters. Here a leader helps us understand from the inside of the process that holding individuals or congregations accountable can be an act not only of unthinking exclusion but also of sincere concern that "pastors, congregations, and conference leaders must reach beyond individualism and autonomy, and must return again and again to the biblical account, seeking the Spirit's leading to better form corporate conscience and actions."

After the final chapter written by Burkholder comes still more—responses from authors of this book to other authors or the book overall, followed by an insightful Afterword from Jeanine Czubaroff. Then the very "last word" comes from J. Ron Byler, an MC USA leader. He wishes for face-to-face conversation more dynamic than what this volume allows and at the same time movingly engages the book amid what strikes me as commitment to genuine conversation. In addition, though placed at the beginning of the book and providing an excellent doorway into its materials and issues, the foreword by Carolyn Schrock-Shenk was written after all but Byler's response was completed.

These materials are intended to have the last word, so I'll offer just three brief sets of comments: First, as I also mentioned to the book's authors, I'm not quite sure what to make of the fact that all the chapter authors who responded were men. Without intending to offend either gender or any given author, does this mean we men are too ready to leap in with perspectives, whether wise or not, and women less so, maybe because too wise to be talking so much?

Second, several respondents suggest my readings of their chapters as offered earlier in this introduction may benefit from their clarifications. I take note.

Third, I am moved that a good many respondents (including Linscheid, whose response weakens my critique of his chapter for not doing this) did make efforts to engage the perspectives of those with whom they disagree. This makes me wonder what would happen if some day some of these authors were able to continue the conversation face-to-face, a way of speaking Czubaroff, Schrock-Shenk, and Byler all suggest may be particularly conducive to genuine conversation.

Precious Lord, Lead Us Home

So we stumble toward genuine conversation, toward the jazz hall, toward a Mennonite Church USA able at the same time to stand on the teachings it discerns for this era yet not just tolerate but actively welcome faithful dissent. Will we reach our destination? No time soon, I'd guess. In the end I don't know how all the instruments could play together. I suspect it's impossible.

So why even work at what may never come to pass? For three reasons. First, even though it may be far from coming to pass at denominational levels, it is already happening and can be encouraged to happen at more local levels. Joyce Lind's is a story of dreaming toward such an outcome in family settings. Kniss gives us one blueprint for implementing it in congregational life. Playing a somewhat different theological instrument yet one still able, I suspect, to harmonize with Kniss's, is Paul Lederach, in Part One, likewise urging that the congregation become a key site for working at such high-voltage, high-stakes matters as these.

Second, the quest is worth understaking because the status quo seems not permanently viable. A leader of one institution came within a hairsbreadth of giving permission for a fascinating, vibrant record of e-mail theologizing among staff regarding whether one staff person should be published in this book. Then despite readiness of the staff person and part of the administrator's own heart to share the discussion publicly as an example of how we might converse productively about these matters down in the trenches, the conversation is not included after all. What carried the day was feedback from a colleague who asked, Why risk publishing such casually worded material—when even the most careful writing on homosexuality is not met with rational responses? I too might have taken such feedback to heart. But is such a status quo one we want forever to live in?

Even more troublingly, if the body of Christ is pictured as those within the concert hall, then the status quo is being bought at the cost of treating some flesh-and-blood people, people who deserve to be people and not biopsied tissue, as tumors to be cut out of the body. I suspect the status quo seems acceptable to the extent we distance ourselves from wounds it inflicts. The tragic dilemma, of course—and what appears to make the quest humanly impossible—is that any movement toward some other status quo will inflict yet some other set of wounds.

Finally, the quest is worthwhile simply because one never knows what early dreamings the God of the impossible possibilities may use, year by year, decade by decade, or longer, to open spaces in the real world for what begins only as wistful lyrics to an evanescent tune.

So I dare to wonder if I hear out there, though yes still far so far away, the bluesy heart-tugging of a gospel song by Thomas A. Dorsey (who as a pre-civil rights African-American must have felt in his bones the power of exclusions justified as scriptural), and one so often also turned into a jazz gem. I hear that song praying with us for our precious Lord to lead us on, through tiredness and weakness, through storm and night, to such a concert palace as God's impossible possible home for each and every one of us who want to play Christ's jazz.

—*Michael A. King*

Afterword

I accepted Michael King's invitation to write this afterword for a number of reasons, one being an appreciation of his work with *DreamSeeker Magazine* and his commitment to dialogic conversation. Besides this shared commitment to conversation, I was grateful for an opportunity to learn more about the controversy over gay and lesbian same-sex relationships in the Christian church, including one of its Mennonite denominational variants. Clearly, the issues underlying this question are profoundly controversial not only in the Christian churches but also in the broader culture. And truthfully, as I thought about it, even as my work in dialogue may interest people, it is also seen as idealistic. Here, in Michael's invitation, was a unique Christian community, among precious few communities, explicitly committed to dialogic ways!

As a Christian and an academic who works in an essentially secular community, Ursinus College, my way to dialogue was neither straightforward nor intellectual. My doctoral work and first two decades of scholarly work focused on examining the conflict involving B. F. Skinner's work *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* and his religious and humanist critics. Not until my first sabbatical in my late forties did I encounter dialogue studies.

The summer before that sabbatical year, providentially, I encountered the religious works of Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, in particular his exegetical essays on the Hebrew Bible and his translations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Hassidic tales, as well as references to his and Franz Rosensweig's translation of the Hebrew Bible into German. The stories and biblical exegesis captured my heart in some powerful ways, so when autumn approached, and I needed to begin the year-long sabbatical research, I threw aside my previous project and pursued Buber's work on dialogue. Over the years since, I have

come to appreciate how the philosophy of dialogue has enabled me to ground and integrate my personal, professional, and spiritual living.

Some biblical stories which speak powerfully to me are found in Genesis and Exodus of the Hebrew Bible. Happily, each fall, as part of a first-year liberal studies course, I have the opportunity to read and discuss much of Genesis and a portion of Exodus with a group of Ursinus freshmen. I am always gripped by the encounters between Abraham and God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah:

So Yhwh said: The outcry in Sedom and Amora—how great it is! And their sin—how exceedingly heavily it weights! Now let me go down and see:

The men turned from there and went toward Sedom, But Avraham still stood in the presence of Yhwh. Avraham came close and said: Will you really sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? Perhaps there are fifty innocent within the city, Will you really sweep it away? Will you not bear with the place because of the fifty innocent that are in its midst? Heaven forbid for you to do a thing like this, To deal death to the innocent along with the guilty, That it should come about: like the innocent, like the guilty, Heaven forbid for you! The judge of all the earth—will he not do what is just?

Yhwh said: If I find in Sedom fifty innocent within the city, I will bear with the whole place for their sake. (Gen. 18: 20-26, *Schocken Bible*)¹

Abraham kept pressing his case: “Perhaps of the fifty innocent, five will be lacking . . .” until he dared push no further and agreed with God that if there were ten innocent persons in these cities, catastrophe might be averted.

Then there is the story of Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush (Exod. 3–4, *Schocken Bible*): “When Yhwh saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, He said: Moshel! Moshel! He said: Here I am.” But once God has revealed his plans for him, Moses demurs, raising many counter-arguments, in what turns out to be a losing argument over his selection: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, that I should bring the Children of Israel out of Egypt?” The people “will not trust me, and will not hearken to my voice, indeed, they will say: Yhwh has not been seen by you . . . !

Please, my Lord, no man of words am I, not from yesterday, not from the day-before, not (even) since you have spoken to your servant, for heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue am I!"

For Martin Buber, these are classic examples of the basic teaching that fills the Hebrew Bible, namely, that "our life is a dialogue between the above and the below." Buber felt Israel's Scripture is distinguished from those of all other nations in that it "tells us how again and again God addresses man and is addressed by him."² What I especially love and respond to in these two stories is the gripping engagement, the giving and receiving of perceptions and reasons. This God who patiently encounters, reasons, and even at times negotiates with his creation, is understandably unsettling for those who assume that the Almighty, in his absolute wisdom, foreknowledge, and goodness, cannot really be reduced to arguing or negotiating—after all, he knows all—and cannot change his mind. What does this reasoning, arguing, even negotiating between God and human beings mean?

Lately, I have wondered, was Jesus dialogic in this Old Testament sense? This April, when invited to speak to a campus InterVarsity student group, I worked through the Gospel of Matthew with that question in mind. I came away thinking Jesus' early encounter with the devil had the character of a verbal contest akin to competitive rather than dialogic argumentation, and that his ambiguous response to Pilate's question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ("You say so,") as well as his silence when pressed for a response to the charges against him, bespoke a recognition of a profoundly power-driven context with no place for dialogue.

However, Jesus' encounters with "the Pharisees" were frequently marked by his willingness to respond and engage in the struggle of reasoning. His encounters with his disciples and the people who came to him for healing were often dialogic. When I met with the InterVarsity students, I spoke about the story of Jesus' meeting with the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15) since I felt it captures what dialogue, in Buber's tradition, entails.

The Canaanite (and thus either pagan or Gentile) woman dares to cross the racial and religious divides of her time and make a claim on Jesus: "Have mercy on me . . . my daughter is tormented by a demon." Jesus initially "does not answer," and his disciples in great annoyance urge him to ignore or dismiss the woman "Send her away for she keeps shouting at us." In the face of their dismissal, Jesus turns toward her and

gives her the reason why he feels he cannot engage her situation: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

But the Canaanite woman will not take no for an answer. Instead, she kneels before Jesus, begging, “Help me.” Jesus, still hearing her claim on him, raises a fairness issue: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” According to one commentary, Jews referred to non-Jews as “dogs” because such people were willing to eat food that Jews felt was only fit for dogs! As if not in the least fazed, the woman does not dispute her status as a “dog” within the Jewish world-view but makes a claim for herself within that status: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Finally, praising her tenacious faithfulness Jesus declares the daughter healed.

Here we have a story in which are present three crucial elements of dialogue: *bilateral/multilateral orientation*, *availability*, and *accountability*. Jesus turned toward and acknowledged the outsider-woman and her perspective. He listened to her claim and responded by honestly revealing his own reasoning—without his openness, she could not have framed counter-arguments that might actually influence him. Finally, he engaged in a mutual accounting in light of implicit standards of fairness.

From my perspective on dialogue, persons have a bilateral (or multilateral) orientation when they enter a situation recognizing that there are other persons with stakes in the situation as well, and, further, when they acknowledge that these others will inevitably have perceptions, feelings, and convictions regarding the situation which are unique. Those dialogically oriented recognize many points of view or interests, each of which may have some validity.

Such persons are also “available.” That is, they make themselves personally available by daring to reveal their own truths and claims, but they are also available to the partner because they join forums in which they may hear and work to understand the other’s perspectives and truths.

Finally, dialogic persons are responsible or “accountable” to the other. They are willing to take the time to ask and respond to questions, willing to call the other to fair response, and willing to “test” (to use a Mennonite term I heard frequently in these essays) their convictions on shared community standards.

In contrast, those with monological or unilateral orientations acknowledge only one side—the “right” or “true” side (usually their own),

and ignore, demean, dismiss, or even vanquish different positions on the grounds that they are ignorant, immature, immoral, and so on. Typically, monologists are intent on having their way and to that end are not available or accountable. They may, for instance, refuse to participate in forums where they must share their ideas, listen to others, and respond. Or they may decline to reveal the grounds for their beliefs and so avoid a genuinely bilateral reasoning and discernment process.

As I reflect from this perspective on the heartfelt essays I encountered in *Stumbling Toward Genuine Conversation*, I am struck powerfully by John Linscheid's lament over what he sees as the move from "loving dialogue with each other," to dialogue "with those who hold differing views," a change in language which Linscheid experiences as an interpersonal "othering," and to which he responds, "I do not wish to silently consent to exclusion by refusing to participate. But does contributing simply give an appearance of balance to another straight-dominated exercise?" While coming from his own distinct experiences, Michael Schaadt, too, decries the "reality that so little true dialogue has taken place within the church regarding this issue," and concludes, "I sometimes question whether dialogue is even a possibility."

Certainly, I believe, there is genuine dialogue in this book. However, I would like to reflect upon the challenges and despairs about dialogue implied by these participants in this conversation. In particular, what are the risks of dialogue which lead us to resort to monologic, unilateral, power-based approaches when we are in intense conflict with others? What are the possible dangers of avoiding dialogue? What observations and questions regarding this conversation might I have that would be of interest to those in the community from which this book emerges?

What, then, are the risks of dialogue? Obviously, there is an inherent risk to the individual who acknowledges another's differing convictions, interests, and agenda—namely, the risk of acknowledging other possible ways of seeing and acting. In the practical context of this book, depending on whether one tends toward inclusion or exclusion on the overarching question regarding individuals in same-sex relationships, there are practical personal and institutional consequences attendant upon whether one takes seriously claims that, for instance, the Bible may be interpreted with integrity in more than one way (including on the issue of homosexual relations); that Christian fidelity is about

covenanted, monogamous relations; that there is no genuine consensus on the issue within the general Mennonite church nor in dissenting congregations; that “teaching positions” are silencing; that Christian heterosexuals differentiate between a hedonistic sexual culture and a faithful, covenanted, monogamous sexual culture for themselves but deny that differentiation to gay and lesbian relations, and so on. The act of listening and giving responsible response seems to give stature and rationality to beliefs one may despise! In the end, it is probably true that one is called to change in dialogic interactions, either personally or communally, thereby risking loss of old ways of believing and acting and the security and stability of past certainties and clarity.

A further risk is that in dialogue one moves from relative clarity and simplicity in conviction to a messy, inconclusive complexity, diversity, and even confusion and ambiguity of belief, as mentioned by Mary Schertz, a seminary professor who notes that she sees homophobia as a justice issue but is not sure what path the church should take on the issues of membership and same-sex union. She writes, “I have mostly been honest in this equivocation, but I have also sometimes been afraid. In rare instances, as a young professor, I was afraid of my seminary administrators, but in many more cases I have been afraid for my seminary administrators—and afraid for the seminary.” Schertz also cites the “vitriol” that often accompanies discussion of differences as another cause of her fear of speaking openly (rather than simply remaining silent).

Underlying the fear of complexity and confusion are almost certainly worldview issues. As Phil Kniss notes, “People are looking for meaning, belonging, and accountability embedded in authentic community.” I confirm that perception, though I’d focus here specifically on our individual search for “meaning.” Not only do conflicts over different ideas, convictions, and policies challenge the Christian community with the evidence of diversity and create confusion for us as we attempt to clarify our own way among the options and differences. In addition, a threat of possible meaninglessness looms as one questions deeply held beliefs and understandings. Marcia Benner Pusey confirms this but also notes the ethical implications of worldview beliefs when she writes, “It is not just our belief systems that bear on our focus and conclusions about homosexuality. It is also what we do with those conclusions.” Here, she confirms John Linscheid, “Beliefs lead to actions.

They have consequences,” and helps us understand the poignancy for each of us when important worldview beliefs are challenged.

If acknowledging that some of our fundamental worldview beliefs are based on false premises entails that we also must see our life as headed “in the wrong direction,” it is not surprising that our first impulse is to dismiss and contradict the claims and arguments of those who differ significantly from ourselves. So, the fear and safety issues run very deep. Add to this threat the real possibility that we may not know how to listen to understand those who think very differently from ourselves, may not know how to respond to their questions or call them to respond to our questions and concerns, or may not know how to manage the fear of the unknown and the anxiety that may accompany that fear, even as our own experience confirms Bruce Hiebert’s observation, “We must take seriously that we do not know exactly what God is bringing us toward.”

What risks of *not* being dialogic can balance the deeply important risks to persons and communities entailed by dialogic relation? I believe the most consequential relational risk to a couple, family, or community in avoiding the challenge of dialogue is the risk of encouraging interpersonal distrust—a distrust which, ultimately, destroys relationships and communities. As Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Barbara Krasner, psychotherapists working in Buber’s tradition, note, “Trustworthiness, the main resource of dialogue, is the glue of viable relationships. Manifest problems represent only the tip of the iceberg. It is mistrust that unglues relationships.”³

Once we doubt that partners care, as demonstrated by their being willing to take fairly into account our own needs, interests, and convictions (rather than, say, ignore, dismiss, or belittle them), distrust is born. And with distrust comes the possibility of alienation, separation, and termination of relation. Relational distrust is heard clearly in Linscheid, who rails at a process with regard to Germantown Mennonite Church which he perceives to have been unilateral and power-based, a process which included (he writes) reliance on excommunication or threats of schism by conservative groups, selective truth telling, “blocking” of a wide hearing for LGBT viewpoints, scuttling of a “third way,” reliance on an “anonymous mail-in ballot with selective options,” and the revoking of pastoral credentials without face-to-face hearings. *DreamSeeker Magazine’s* first round of conversation *about* the place of

gays and lesbians in same-sex relations in the Mennonite church, which did not, however, include gay and lesbian voices, simply added to a number of gay and lesbian participants' fears.

Sheldon Burkhalter seems to at least implicitly acknowledge monologic actions on all sides of this conflict in his discussion of the problems with a "politicized discernment process," which included divisive attitudes, coalition building, and unilateral actions on "untested convictions" (for him, an example is premature corporate public statements). His proposed guidelines to me seem to be an offer of some explicit standards which might be shared by the broader community to ensure a more just process of mutual accounting.

From Linscheid's point of view, the gay and lesbian community has "responded comprehensively," including with biblical exegesis, to questions from the broader community. I would ask, can those in favor of greater inclusion, in fairness, acknowledge the threats their convictions entail to very enduring Mennonite and Christian understandings? Can they acknowledge (as a number of participants do) uncertainties and questions related to untested lifestyles, even as they call the majority in the Mennonite community to hear and fairly respond to their stories and convictions? For that matter, can they see how Weldon Nisly's blessing of a same-sex marriage might be perceived by others in the church as unilateral in its own way, a public action on an insufficiently tested conviction—to relate the action to Sheldon Burkhalter's proposed guidelines for leaders?

Which brings me to reflection on what Phil Kniss calls questions of ecclesiology. To Everett Thomas' claim that the church has the "ultimate authority to determine what is right and wrong," I am inclined to ask, who is "the church"? In light of C. Norman Kraus's observation "that the process of orderly spiritual discernment in the church has lost ground to the fear factor in the past decades" and since spiritual discernment is so central to Mennonite church process, I ask, What distinguishes "ethical discernment" from discernment with less authority?

Kniss differentiates between the church as a human institution and as a spiritual community and asks, How shall we do church? His vision of an ideal congregation composed of small, personal, eucharistic communities within which Christian formation and accountability and membership judgments are made reminds me of the vision of church described by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, two Australian pastors as-

sociated with the worldwide emerging church, in *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the Twenty-First-Century Church*. They contrast an “attractional,” “bounded set” model with their missional-incarnational, Christ-centered model,

The attractional church is a bounded set. That is, it is a set of people clearly marked off from those who do not belong to it. Churches thus mark themselves in a variety of ways. Having a church membership role is an obvious one. This mechanism determines who is in and who is out. The missional-incarnational church, though, is a centered-set. This means that rather than drawing a boundary to determine who belongs and who doesn't, a centered-set is defined by its core values, and people are not seen as in or out, but as closer or farther away from the center. In that sense, everyone is in and no one is out. Though some people are close to the center and others far from it, everyone is potentially part of the community in its broadest sense. . . .

Churches that see themselves as a centered set recognize that the gospel is so precious, so refreshing that, like a well in the Australian Outback, lovers of Christ will not stray too far from it. . . . In this way, the missional-incarnational church sees people as Christian and not-yet-Christian. It acknowledges the contribution of not-yet-Christians to Christian community and values the contribution of all people.⁴

What is intriguing (and also radical) about this model is its potential usefulness for the contemporary church as it makes its way and its case in an increasingly non-Christian world. For Hirsch and Foster, the centered-set church sidesteps troubling dichotomies by recognizing all as the children of the one God and acknowledging the possible “contributions of not-yet-Christians to Christian community and values.”

As an outsider invited to listen in and comment on an ongoing conversation, what final, practical observations or questions do I have? Numbers of persons in this volume call for additional inclusive, safe forums for talk, encounter, and ethical discernment. So, an obvious question is, What else might Mennonites do to follow through with that call?

Certainly, Michael King's non-institutional, privately financed publications are remarkable ventures providing accessible, integrity-based written dialogic forums. What can be done to make authentic

speech safer? Fear in the face of the call to authentic speech can probably never be eliminated. However, I wonder whether study of the more subtle “nonviolent” ways power may be exercised, as well as study of the ways communities control, intimidate, and impose, might be consistent with Mennonite commitment to the way of peace.

Finally, from my point of view, dialogue is not only about authentic speech and listening but also about mutual accountability, problem solving, and negotiation. In a given conflict context (such as with regard to homosexuality), who is permitted to hold whom accountable and in what forums, relying upon what shared standards? My own experience as a professor of communication suggests to me that accountability works best in face-to-face forums. As King notes, the participants in this conversation are very good at articulating their own points of view but much less inclined to make connections to, question, and respond to each others’ positions. Given that mutual questioning and responding (and, thus, accountability) are more likely to occur in face-to-face encounters, a good question may be, What forums for face-to-face encounters are possible for the Mennonite community as it seeks to discern its stand on the issues of homosexuality?

When is there enough of listening, responding, and mutually accountable reasoning? When is a community justified in stopping the talk about a highly contentious issue and acting decisively? I don’t, of course, have an answer. Jesus’ teachings and life lead me to believe, however, that I should be very careful before I turn away from another who sincerely makes a claim on me. Jesus teaches us, “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5: 23-24).

I hear in my own ears Martin Buber’s concluding comments to his famous address, “Genuine Dialogue and the Possibilities of Peace,” to the German Book Trade upon accepting their peace prize on September 27, 1953. Accepting the prize required that he be present in Germany, his home country from which he had fled after the Nazis came to power and increasingly circumscribed his life as a professor and Jew. He said,

That peoples can no longer dare an authentic dialogue with one another is not only the most acute symptom of the pathology of our time, it is also that which most urgently makes a demand on

us. I believe, despite all, that the peoples in this hour can enter into genuine dialogue, into a genuine dialogue with one another. In a genuine dialogue each of the partners, even when he stands in opposition to the other, heeds, affirms, and confirms his opponent as an existing other. Only so can conflict certainly not be eliminated from the world, but be humanly arbitrated and led toward its overcoming.

To the task of initiating this conversation those are inevitably called who carry on today within each people the battle against the anti-human. Those who build the great unknown front across mankind shall make it known by speaking unreservedly with one another, not overlooking what divides them, but determined to bear this division in common.

In opposition to them stands the element that profits from the divisions between the peoples, the contra-human in men, the subhuman, the enemy of man's will to become a true humanity.

The name *Satan* means in Hebrew the hinderer; that is the correct designation for the anti-human in individuals and in the human race. Let us not allow this Satanic element in men to hinder us from realizing man! Let us release speech from its ban! Let us dare, despite all, to trust!"⁵

—Jeanine Czubaroff, *Media, Pennsylvania, is professor and department chair, Media and Communication Studies, Ursinus College*

NOTES

1. *Shooken Bible*, vol. 1, trans. Everett Fox (New York: Random House, 2000).
2. Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, ed. N. N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 215.
3. Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Barbara R. Krasner, *Between Give and Take: A Clinical Guide to Contextual Therapy* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1986), p. 74.
4. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the Twenty-First-Century Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), p. 47.
5. Martin Buber, "Genuine Dialogue and the Possibilities of Peace," in *The Reach of Dialogue: Confirmation, Voice, and Community*, ed. Ray Anderson, Kenneth N. Cissna, Ronald C. Arnett (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1994), 311.

Last Word

At San Jose 2007, the biannual convention for Mennonite Church USA last July, speaker after speaker told us how they were drawn into the Mennonite family. They reminded us of our calling within the larger Christian church to speak out for peace and justice for all people. One speaker said it this way, “Thanks for what you have given me, and please continue to be who you say you are.”

Despite our best efforts to avoid the issue, homosexuality in the church will not go away, and we are not at peace with each other. One of the reasons may be that we have not been true to our word. As several writers in this book point out, our Purdue and Saskatoon statements not only state our belief about same-gender orientation but also promise that we will continue to talk to each other about it.

Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality is aptly named. We would still stumble, but less often, if we could find a way to talk face-to-face about this topic, rather than through books like this one. And still, I found myself laughing and crying as I read through these pages. Many of the authors are people I know and love. People whose opinions I respect dearly. So often, I wanted to say “Yes, but . . .” or “But you’re forgetting that. . . .” But we are left with words on a page rather than real-time conversation.

Yet that’s the point, isn’t it? For whatever reason, we are only now beginning to provide space in the church to talk about this issue and others that have the potential to divide us.

So let me contribute to this conversation by telling you what I think and feel today. . . .

- I simply don’t think there is enough support one way or the other to be clear about what the Bible says (and means) about homosexual relationships.

- The Purdue and Saskatoon statements, as well as the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, represent what the majority of Mennonites think and feel about this issue. People should read these documents (www.mcusa-archives.org/library/resolutions/) more closely, though, to remember all of what these statements have to say and recommend.
- The easy line we draw between homosexual orientation and practice feels fundamentally unfair, unjust, and impractical to me.
- Mennonite leaders have failed to live up to our agreement to say clearly what we believe about differing sexual orientation and provide safe space for the church to talk about it. We have a sincere desire to maintain the unity of the church, and we often are fearful of the things that threaten to divide us.
- Discernment happens at different levels of church—congregation, conference, and denomination—and we have not yet figured out how to reconcile them.
- When congregations have been more open toward including gay and lesbian members, and the congregations have chosen to stay in relationship with their area conference and denomination, we must respond to their invitations to “Come and see.”
- We should be much quicker to admit we can’t solve this issue by ourselves and more open about asking God’s spirit to guide us.

Listen to the honest voices of the followers of Jesus in this book.

I would wish that John Linscheid could extend more grace to church leaders who are in a difficult spot, but I also know firsthand that John is one of the saints of the church and that his pain is real. I am touched by Mary Schertz’s honesty and wish that I could have been so forthright long ago. I am challenged by Mark Thiessen Nation’s struggle to be accountable to his gay and lesbian friends and to speak with honesty and compassion.

These voices are real. All of them are part of us. And that is why we need to listen to each other. To truly find where God is leading us as a church.

I wish that we could be more consistent in how we apply the 1995 *Confession of Faith* or at least say why we are not. And I strongly resonate with Phil Kniss’ wish that, rather than lowering the bar on sexual sins, we would find ways to raise the bar on how we call all of us to account.

Says Michael King, “So we stumble toward genuine conversation . . . toward a Mennonite Church USA able at the same time to stand on the teachings it discerns for this era yet not just tolerate but actively welcome faithful dissent.”

Says our churchwide statement, “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love,” accept conflict, listen to each other, and trust the community.

Michael and the voices in this book describe the kind of church I want to be part of. Yes, Bruce Hiebert, with God’s help, the church can do a better job of being the people God calls us to be.

God, we ask you to help us listen to and hear each other in the church in ways that honor you and honor each other. Thank you for my brothers and sisters in this book who have shared their perspectives. May they truly be instruments for your love and grace among us. Amen.

—*J. Ron Byler, Goshen, Indiana, is associate executive director of Mennonite Church USA*